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SUBJECT: WASIT SADRISTS: SISTANI EDICT ON MILITIAS DOES NOT APPLY

REF: A. 2005 HILLAH 262 REF B. 2006 HILLAH 74

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The head of the Wasit Sadr Office, Bashaar Al-Mousawi, in an April 30 meeting with Regional Embassy Office (REO) Al-Hillah staff, insisted that the April 27 statement on militias from Grand Ayatollah Sistani does not apply to Sadrist Jaysh Al-Mahdi forces in the province. JAM forces are too disorganized and poorly armed to be properly considered a militia, according to Al-Mousawi. Therefore, Sistani's statement was applicable only to the Badr Organization and Kurdish Peshmerga militias. Al-Mousawi was confident that the "Sadrism Current" would continue to gain in influence and power in Wasit. Relations between Wasit Sadrists and local branches of the Badr Organization and Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) would remain stable, Al-Mousawi said, but violence between the two remained a possibility. END SUMMARY.

WASIT SADRISTS CONFIDENT SISTANI'S MILITIA EDICT DOES NOT APPLY

¶2. (C) The April 30 meeting, held at the request of Al-Mousawi in the Wasit Provincial Council Building in Al-Kut, was the first face-to-face contact in over ten months between Wasit Sadrism representatives and Regional Embassy Office staff. Also present at the meeting were Sadrism Provincial Council members Ahmed Hussain Abrrah and Ahmed Shebab Hamad. They were joined by Nassar Al-Husseini, who identified himself as the "Administrative and Financial Manager" for the Sadr Office in Wasit.

¶3. (C) Al-Mousawi said he interpreted Grand Ayatollah Sistani's declaration that weapons must be only in the hands of "government forces" (ref A) as applying exclusively to the Badr Organization and the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Wasit Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM), according to Al-Mousawi, are "disorganized" and focused solely on protecting themselves. Further, since the JAM are not supported by "a foreign state", they could not be considered a militia. Al-Mousawi, backed enthusiastically by Sadr Office administrator Al-Husseini, said the JAM would continue to bear arms and "resist" as long as foreign forces were present in Iraq.

SADRISTS EXPECT LARGER ROLE IN FUTURE

¶4. (C) The tensions--occasionally violent--that characterize the

relationship between Sadrists and members of SCIRI/Badr in Wasit have largely subsided, according to Al-Mousawi. He admitted that while Sadrists were responsible for the last major outbreak of violence in August, 2005 (ref B), relations between the two groups would hinge largely on national-level developments. So long as Sadrists are treated fairly and with respect in the national government, Al-Mousawi said, he did not foresee problems in the near-term. NOTE: Al-Mousawi originally described SCIRI and Badr organization officials in the province as his "enemies," then immediately corrected himself and used the more neutral "other groups." To the amusement of his colleagues, Al-Mousawi then said, "When I say enemies, I only mean the American occupation forces." END NOTE.

15. (C) Al-Mousawi, supported by PC members Abrrah and Hamad, predicted that provincial elections, regardless of when they are held, will lead to a much more powerful role for the Sadrists in Wasit. One of the Sadr Office's largest problems is that some independent members of the PC pretend to speak on behalf of the Sadr Office to Coalition Forces in the province, according to Al-Mousawi. Abrrah and Hamad both asserted that only the Sadr Office and its sympathizers have a successful record of helping the poor and disadvantaged in the province. In their opinion, when voters compare the track record of the allegedly "incompetent" SCIRI-dominated PC to the Sadrists, sentiment will overwhelmingly favor the Sadrists.

16. (C) Sadr Office administrator Al-Husseini and PC member Hamad both asserted that the presence of Coalition Forces in the province was hurting the security situation. Al-Husseini in particular protested that Coalition Forces do not respect the Sadrists and have repeatedly tried to provoke a confrontation between the Coalition Forces and JAM. Hamad angrily questioned why there are still foreign military forces in the province. In his opinion, U.S. forces are intentionally allowing terrorists to cross into Iraq through Syria to provide a base for the insurgency, and thus a rationale for the continued presence of U.S. and Coalition Forces. NOTE: Hussein insisted that U.S. forces "raided" his office during the week of April 25th and

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that only his "restraint" prevented a larger conflict. According to U.S. military contacts and in the judgment of REO staff, this "raid" did not occur as Hussein described. END NOTE.

17. (C) COMMENT: Wild conspiracy theories and unwarranted allegations notwithstanding, the April 30 meeting provided a clear picture of the growing confidence of the Sadrist movement in Wasit province. Previously, Sadrists in the province would cancel planned meetings at the last second, or refuse outright to speak to REO personnel. However, this meeting took place in the heavily trafficked Provincial Council building.

18. (C) Though Al-Mousawi is respected as the political "face" of the Sadrist movement in the province, it is unclear what standing he has in the broader, Najaf-based Sadr hierarchy. The Sadrists' assessment of their provincial election prospects, while optimistic, has some basis in fact, as there is widespread discontent with the current provincial government. Less believable, however, is Al-Mousawi's optimistic assessment of Sadrist relations in the province with SCIRI/Badr. Regardless of the situation in Baghdad, it is difficult to imagine that SCIRI/Badr will stand idle to Sadr's challenge when maneuvering for the provincial election begins in earnest. END COMMENT.
FONTENEAU